

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5277
INFO AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY NAIROBI
AMEMBASSY PARIS
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
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S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 3 ADDIS ABABA 4978

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS PBOR MOPS ET SO US
SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA'S MILITARY CRISIS AND THE US

SUMMARY: ETHIOPIA'S MILITARY FORTUNES HAVE DETERIORATED
TO EXTENT THAT LOSS OF ASSAB ROAD OR MAJOR TOWNS OF DIRE
DAWA AND HARAR COULD PROVE DECISIVE BLOWS IN
BREAKING OFF THESE PORTIONS OF COUNTRY. RECOGNIZING ITS
DANGER, EPMG HAS LAUNCHED CAMPAIGN FOR DOMESTIC BACKING
OF WAR EFFORT AND FOR INTERNATIONAL MORAL SUPPORT OF ITS
CASE AGAINST SOMALI AGGRESSION. IT ALSO APPEARS TO BE
REEXAMINING ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH US AND SEVERAL OTHER
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COUNTRIES WHO HERETOFORE HAVE BEEN CONSIDERED ENEMIES
OF REVOLUTION. ALTHOUGH EPMG'S TIES WITH USSR WILL
ALMOST CERTAINLY CONTINUE TO BE CLOSE, SOME REVERSION
TO EHTIOPIA'S PREVIOUS NONALIGNED POSTURE COULD WELL
OCCUR. IN THIS CONNECTION, MODEST US MOVES COULD BE
HELPFUL. END SUMMARY.

1. THERE ARE INCREASING SIGNS THAT ADVERSE MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS IN BOTH OGADEN AND ERITREA HAVE CAUSED EPMG TO TAKE HARD LOOK AT ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH ALL FOREIGN COUNTRIES BEARING IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER ON CONFLICT. WHETHER THIS HARD LOOK WILL CHANGE ANYTHING DEPENDS TO LARGE EXTENT ON HOW CRITICAL SITUATION HAS ACTUALLY BECOME AND ON DEGREE TO WHICH EPMG CONCLUDES THAT IT HAS LOCKED ITSELF INTO COURSE OF ACTION FOR WHICH IT SEES NO ALTERNATIVES. THIS CABLE ATTEMPTS TO EXAMINE ETHIOPIA'S CURRENT MILITARY, DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SITUATION AND TO ASSESS ITS IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE COURSE OF EVENTS IN REGION AND US ROLE THEREIN.

2. MILITARILY, ETHIOPIA IS IN SERIOUS STRAITS, AT LEAST IN SHORT RUN. IN SOUTH, MOST OF HARRARGHE AND BALE AND SOME OF SIDAMO REGIONS ARE IN ENEMY HANDS. ALTHOUGH DEFENSE PERIMETER AROUND MAJOR OGADEN TOWNS OF DIRE DAWA, HARAR AND JIJIGA APPEARS TO BE STABILIZED TEMPORARILY, ETHIOPIAN ARMY CONTINUES TO FALL BACK FARTHER WEST, AND SOMALI GUERRILLAS ARE RELENTLESSLY PURSUING THEIR DRIVE FOR BALE CAPITAL OF GOBA AND SIDAMO TOWN OF NEGELE. ETHIOPIAN ARMED FORCES IN OGADEN ARE STILL NOT AT FULL STRENGTH AND ARE PLAGUED BY MAINTENANCE AND LOGISTICS PROBLEMS, ALTHOUGH THEY HAVE BEEN BOLSTERED ON MANPOWER SIDE
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OVER PAST MONTH BY SOME 40,000 NEW AND UNTRIED MILITIA TROOPS.

3. IN ERITREA ARMY ALSO CONTINUES TO GIVE GROUND. SINCE FALL OF KEREN IN EARLY JULY, INSURGENTS HAVE PROGRESSIVELY PICKED OFF SEVERAL SMALLER TOWNS. FOLLOWING CLOSURE OF DJIBOUTI-ADDIS RAILROAD, ASSAB HAS ASSUMED PARAMOUNT SIGNIFICANCE AS OUTLET FOR ETHIOPIA'S LAST REMAINING LAND SUPPLY ROUTE, AND FEARS HAVE GROWN FOR ITS VULNERABILITY, DESPITE MILITIA AND OTHER REINFORCEMENTS TO COUNTERACT ANY INTERDICTORY MOVES BY INSURGENTS.

4. ON DOMESTIC POLITICAL FRONT, ATMOSPHERE IS ONE OF PUBLICLY EXPRESSED CONFIDENCE BY DIRG WITH UNDERLYING CONCERN AND FULL APPRECIATION OF GRAVITY OF SITUATION. WE HAVE SEEN NO INDICATIONS OF DISSENSION WITHIN TOP RANKS OF DIRG, MOST OF WHOM HAVE GAINED INCREASING MEDIA PROMINENCE, EITHER IN STIMULATING WAR EFFORT AT HOME OR CARRYING OUT DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS ABROAD. THERE HAVE BEEN REPORTS OF POLICY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DIRG AND ITS MORE IDEOLOGICALLY MINDED ADVISERS ON

POMOA, IN WHICH WE SEE EVIDENCE OF POSSIBLE DECLINE
OF EXTREME RADICAL INFLUENCE, AT LEAST SO LONG AS
LEADERSHIP MUST GRAPPLE WITH OVERRIDING TASK OF
NATIONAL SURVIVAL.

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5. ADDIS ABABA ITSELF HAS BEEN QUIETER THAN AT ANY
TIME THIS YEAR. POLICE PATROLS ARE AT MINIMUM,
ASSASSINATION RATE HAS DROPPED OFF SOME, AND THERE
ARE NO SIGNS OF UNREST THAT WE CAN DETECT. OFFICIAL
EMPHASIS IS ON PATRIOTISM AND SACRIFICE, IN PREPARA-
TION FOR LONG REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE. WHILE SUCH
EXHORTATIONS HAVE AROUSED NO GREAT WAVES OF POPULAR
ENTHUSIASM, PUBLIC HAS SO FAR SUBMITTED TO GASOLINE
SHORTAGES, BREAD LINES, AND CALLS FOR BLOOD AND MONE-
TARY SUPPORT WITHOUT VISIBLE GRUMBLING. MOST IMPOR-
TANT, AS EMBASSY HAS OFTEN INDICATED, ARMY SUPPORT FOR
DIRG IS STILL HOLDING, DESPITE OCCASIONAL REPORTS OF
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LOW MORALE, SOME DESERTIONS AND UNWILLINGNESS TO FIGHT WITHIN NEW MILITIA RANKS, AND SPORADIC DISGRUNTLEMENT OVER INDISCRIMINATE PRUNING OF MANY COMPETENT MILITARY COMMANDERS DURING PAST THREE YEARS FOR IDEOLOGICAL REASONS.

6. BIG CHANGE ON INTERNATIONAL SIDE SINCE ESCALATION OF OGADEN FIGHTING IS GROWING TALK OF EPMG DISILLUSIONMENT WITH SOVIET UNION. IT APPEARS THAT BOTH PARTNERS MAY HAVE EXPECTED TOO MUCH FROM EACH OTHER. ETHIOPIA'S LONGSTANDING PREOCCUPATION WITH SOMALI THREAT AND MENGISTU'S PERCEPTION THAT USSR MIGHT BE IN BETTER POSITION TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT NO DOUBT PROMPTED HIM TO DEPART SO DRASTICALLY FROM PREVIOUS EPMG POSTURE OF NONALIGNMENT WITH LEFTIST TILT AND US MILITARY BACKING. HOWEVER, HE SEEMS TO HAVE OVERESTIMATED MOSCOW'S RESTRAINING INFLUENCE ON SOMALIA'S IRREDENTIST AMBITIONS, WHILE AT SAME TIME UNDERESTIMATING RESTRAINT FACTOR ON SOMALIA OF ETHIOPIA'S PAST MILITARY RELATIONSHIP WITH US. ALTHOUGH USSR APPARENTLY HAS BEEN FAITHFUL TO ITS COMMITMENT TO PROVIDE MASSIVE MILITARY ASSISTANCE, FACT REMAINS THAT VOLUME OF ANTI-WEST NOISES HAS EASED OFF HERE TO SURPRISING DEGREE IN RECENT WEEKS, AT VERY TIME WHEN, AS RESULT OF OUR DECISION ON ARMS FOR SOMALIA, WE COULD HAVE EXPECTED EXACT OPPOSITE TO HAPPEN. PROPAGANDA ATTACKS ON SUDAN, EGYPT, AND SAUDI ARABIA HAVE LIKEWISE SUBSIDED, AND EVEN MUCH OF OLD PRESS GARBAGE OF GLORIES OF MARXISM-LENINISM IS NO LONGER AS PROMINENT AS IT HAD BEEN. DIPLOMATICALLY, ETHIOPIA HAS DEVELOPED GOOD CASE FOR BRANDING SOMALIA AS AGGRESSOR IN OGADEN, AS EVIDENCED BY ITS RECENT SUCCESS WITH OAU IN LIBREVILLE AND ITS MORE RECENT

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EFFORTS TO CONVERT WESTERN JOURNALISTS. EPMG REALIZES, HOWEVER, THAT DIPLOMATIC SUCCESS PROVIDES LITTLE HELP ON BATTLEGROUND AND THAT IT MUST CAST ELSEWHERE FOR SOME SOLUTION TO ITS MILITARY PROBLEMS.

7. THAT SOLUTION CERTAINLY DOES NOT LIE IN JETTISONING SOVIET UNION, FLIP-FLOPPING ONCE AGAIN, AND LANDING BACK IN WESTERN CAMP. DESPITE HINTS OF DESIRE FOR US SPARE PARTS, F-5E'S, TRANSFERES THROUGH THIRD COUNTRIES, AND GESTURES OF GOOD WILL, EPMG MUST

REALIZE THAT IT CANNOT BREAK AWAY FROM USSR AND ITS SURROGATES. BUT IT CAN AND MAY VERY WELL CHOOSE TO SLIDE GRADUALLY BACK IN DIRECTION OF MORE GENUINE NONALIGNMENT AND MAY ALSO IN PROCESS HAVE LEARNED VITAL LESSON THAT TO HAVE FRIENDS IN TIME OF NEED IS BETTER THAN TO HAVE ENEMIES. AS DIRG MEMBER MAJOR FISSEHA DESTA RECENTLY COMMENTED WRYLY TO NY TIMES CORRESPONDENT, "WE ARE COMING TO REALIZE THAT, WHILE ETHIOPIANS MAKE PRETTY GOOD REVOLUTIONARIES, WE HAVE ALSO BEEN LOUSY POLITICIANS."

8. AT SAME TIME, DESPITE PRESENT REVERSES, THERE IS ALWAYS POSSIBILITY, AS RESULT CONTINUING INFLUX OF SOVBLOC ARMS ASSISTANCE, THAT TIDE OF BATTLE IN OGADEN COULD CHANGE QUICKLY, THAT SOVIETS WOULD GET MAJOR CREDIT FOR STABILIZATION, AND THAT EPMG WOULD THEN QUICKLY REVERT TO TYPE.

9. LOOKING DOWN MILITARY ROAD, ETHIOPIANS ARE AWARE THAT, WHILE THEIR TRACK RECORD IS NOT PROMISING, THEY MUST HOLD ON SOMEWHERE. FOR MOMENT, THAT SOMEWHERE IS FIRST AND FOREMOST TO MAINTAIN ITS CONTROL OVER PORT OF ASSAB AND MAIN ROAD TO INTERIOR, SECOND TO HOLD ON TO DIRE DAWA AND HARAR. WITHOUT THESE MINIMAL PREREQUISITES, PROSPECT ON BOTH FRONTS LOOKS BLEAK INDEED, ALTHOUGH IMPACT OF POSSIBLE LOSS OF
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ONE OR BOTH OGADEN AND ERITREA ON EPMG AND ADDIS IS STILL OPEN QUESTION. LOSS OF ASSAB ROAD IN PARTICULAR WOULD BE GRIEVOUS, STOPPING MILITARY VIRTUALLY IN THEIR TRACKS EXCEPT IN ERITREA THROUGH LOSS OF POL SUPPLIES AND CAUSING SERIOUS NATIONWIDE ECONOMIC DISRUPTION. MUCH WOULD ALSO DEPEND ON HOW MUCH SOMALIA IS WILLING TO COMMIT OF AS YET UNEXPENDED PORTION OF ITS ARMED FORCES IN ORDER TO COMPLETE ITS CONQUEST OF OGADEN. WE HEAR REPORTS THAT ETHIOPIA MAY BE BUILDING UP FOR COUNTEROFFENSIVE, ALTHOUGH WE CONSIDER PROSPECT NOT IMMINENT IN EITHER OGADEN OR ERITREA, SO LONG AS LOSSES IN BALE AND SIDAMO CONTINUE. PROSPECT OF SURFACE STRIKE INTO SOMALIA SEEMS MOST DUBIOUS. SAME HOLDS TRUE FOR POSSIBLE AIR STRIKES AGAINST SOMALI TERRITORY, WHICH WOULD DO LITTLE TO LESSEN ETHIOPIA'S CURRENT MILITARY WOES AND MUCH TO DESTROY ETHIOPIA'S CASE THAT IT IS VICTIM OF AGGRESSION. EMBASSY ALSO DOUBTS THAT EPMG WILL CALL ON KENYA TO COME TO ITS AID, OR THAT IT WOULD GET MUCH HELP FROM THAT QUARTER IF IT DID.

10. IN SHORT, BAD AS ETHIOPIA'S TROUBLES ARE, EMBASSY

DOES NOT SEE COUNTRY BREAKING UP YET, AS LONG AS ARMY,
WHOSE SUPPORT AS ALWAYS IS CRUCIAL, REMAINS RELATIVELY
INTACT AND DEPENDABLE, OR AT LEAST IMPASSIVE, AND AS
LONG AS NO UNITED OPPOSITION EMERGES FROM ELSEWHERE
WITHIN COUNTRY.

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11. ONE OF REGRETTABLE ASPECTS OF CURRENT CRISIS IN
HORN AND IN ETHIOPIA IN PARTICULAR IS THAT ALL OF
MAJOR PROTAGONISTS APPEAR TO BE OPERATING TOWARD
ESSENTIALLY SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES OF THEIR OWN, WITH
LITTLE REGARD FOR LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES FOR REGION.
DESPITE PERSISTENT RUMORS THAT PLF AND EPMG WILL
EVENTUALLY MAKE DEAL, ERITREAN INSURGENTS GIVE EVERY
APPEARANCE OF SMELLING VICTORY AND BEING HELLBENT FOR
INDEPENDENCE, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER YET ANOTHER
IN LONG RUN THEY CAN MAKE IT STICK, WHETHER IT WOULD
SERVE THEIR INTERESTS BETTER THAN AUTONOMY THEY COULD
ALMOST CERTAINLY NOW ACHIEVE AT MUCH LESS COST, OR

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WHETHER THEY FALL TO FIGHTING AMONG THEMSELVES AFTER INDEPENDENCE. OGADEN INSURGENTS MAY HONESTLY BELIEVE THEY WOULD BE BETTER OFF ASSOCIATED WITH SOMALIA, BUT WE DOUBT IT. SOMALIA'S DRIVE FOR GREATER SOMALIA LOOKS IN TERMS OF QUICK SUCCESSES, IGNORING COMPLETELY PROSPECT THAT MILITARY SOLUTION ALONE HAS WITHIN IT ALL THE SEEDS OF PERPETUATING STRUGGLE. ARABS SEEM TO THINK ONLY IN TERMS OF SUPPORTING FELLOW MOSLEMS, RELIGIOUS CONSOLIDATION, AND EMBARRASSING SOVIETS. ISRAEL, PREOCCUPIED WITH ARAB LAKE CONCEPT, SEEMS TO HAVE CAST ITS LOT WITH UNLIKELY BEDFELLOWS. OAU IS POWERLESS, DESPITE FACT THAT PRINCIPLES OF CARDINAL IMPORTANCE TO EVERY MEMBER STATE ARE AT STAKE.

12. ALL EITHER CHOOSE TO FORGET, OR ARE EVEN COUNTING ON FACT, THAT MENGISTU CANNOT SIMPLY NEGOTIATE AWAY TERRITORY AND EXPECT TO REMAIN IN POWER, NOR DO WE BELIEVE THAT ANY SUCCESSOR COULD EITHER. PROBLEMS THUS GENERATED WILL NOT GO AWAY, AND CONSEQUENCES OF ETHIOPIAN BREAKUP--INSTABILITY, POLITICAL VACUUM, DESIRE TO SETTLE OLD SCORES--ARE IMMEASURABLE. IT MAY IN FACT TURN OUT THAT SOVIET UNION IS ONLY COUNTRY THAT HAS GIVEN THESE LONGER TERM CONSEQUENCES ANY THOUGHT. ONCE AGAIN IT MAY FORESEE CONDITIONS OF INSTABILITY AND UNREST MADE TO ORDER FOR FURTHERING ITS OWN AIMS AT EXPENSE OF ALL THE OTHER PLAYERS IN GAME. NO ONE SEEMS TO WORRY MUCH ABOUT ETHIOPIA ITSELF AND PARTICULARLY LONG-TERM PROSPECTS FOR INSTABILITY IN HORN OF A PRAGMENTED ETHIOPIA. FACILE ASSUMPTION THAT, IF MENGISTU CAN JUST BE DISPOSED OF ALNOG WITH SOVIETS, EVERYTHING WILL COME UP ROSES IGNORES FACTS OF ETHIOPIAN LIFE.

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13. THIS LEAVES QUESTION OF WHETHER THERE IS USEFUL ROLE FOR US TO PLAY HERE BEYOND THAT IN WHICH WE ALREADY FIND OURSELVES. EMBASSY FULLY REALIZES THAT THERE ARE GREATER INTERESTS AT STAKE IN HORN THAN SIMPLY OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH ETHIOPIA. YET AS DEPT AWARE, EPMG APPEARS TO BE OFFERING MODEST OPENING TO BETTER RELATIONS. BY ITS OWN ACTIONS EPMG HAS LEFT US FEW ASSETS WITH WHICH TO RESPOND, ESPECIALLY IN MILITARY FIELD, AND IN ANY CASE SIGNALS ARE STILL

FAR FROM SUFFICIENTLY DISTINCT TO WARRANT EITHER
DRAWING HASTY CONSLUSIONS OR ADOPTING MORE THAN POS-
TURE OF RECEPTIVE LISTENING. WE HAVE ALREADY BECOME
MORE OUTSPOKEN IN REAFFIRMING OUR MORAL SUPPORT FOR
AFRICAN PRINCIPLES THAT BENEFIT ETHIOPIA IN ITS PRE-
SENT CRISIS. ELSEWHERE, WE HAVE SUGGESTED OTHER
POSSIBILITIES THAT WE BELIEVE WOULD BE WELL RECEIVED.
BASICALLY, HOWEVER, IT STRIKES US THAT NOW IS A GOOD
TIME TO WATCH AND WAIT, KEEPING IN MIND THAT EVENTS
MAY BE MOVING BACK IN OUR DIRECTION AFTER LONG PERIOD
OF GOING THE OTHER WAY. SHOULD THIS TREND PROVE OUT,
IT WOULD BE SIGNAL THAT ETHIOPIANS ARE NOT PREPARED
BECOME FULL-FLEDGED SOVIET CLIENT STATE. WE SHALL
THEN WANT TO BE ALERT TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OPENINGS
AS THEY OCCUR. FROM VARIOUS INDICATIONS EMBASSY HAS
BEEN GETTING, THIS MAY EVEN TAKE FORM OF ETHIOPIAN
REQUEST FOR ARMS ASSISTANCE. SHOULD THIS HAPPEN, WE
SHALL WANT TO WEIGH CAREFULLY NATURE OF REQUEST AND
CHANNEL IN WHICH IT IS RELAYED BEFORE DETERMINING OUR
RESPONSE.
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